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The Agency Aesthetics of Biofiction in the Age of Postmodern Confusion

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Introduction: The Agency Aesthetics of Biofiction in the Age of Postmodern Confusion

Michael Lackey

In 2012, when I first had the idea of interviewing biographical novelists for my *Truthful Fictions* book, I felt like I was embarking on an isolated scholarly journey. At that time, I knew no other scholars who were working on biofiction, and I was unaware of the scattered and little work that had been done about the aesthetic form. But as I interviewed authors and started to write my introduction to the book, I made some unexpected discoveries. John Keener, who entered the University of Kentucky's PhD program around the same time as me, wrote his dissertation about biographical novels. It was published in 2001. In *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, Keener discusses the work of Guy Davenport, who taught at the University of Kentucky and with whom John and I both studied. In one of my graduate courses, a professor had us read Davenport's "Ithaka," a short story about Ezra Pound, and I wrote a paper about this work. In 2009 and 2011, I published articles about Zora Neale Hurston's biographical novels *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Herod the Great*, and in my 2012 book *The Modernist God State*, I did an extensive analysis of David Mamet's *The Old Religion*, a biographical novel about Leo Frank. Put simply, biofiction has been a significant part of my academic life for the last twenty-five years: I have been reading and teaching it, I have been writing about it, and I have even published about it, and yet, I didn't see it as biofiction until I started working on my first book of interviews with biographical novelists.

This issue of simultaneously seeing and not seeing came into sharp focus for me at the 2017 MLA convention in Philadelphia. I was at the International Auto/Biography Association's annual party, where a scholar looked at my nametag and said: "You're the guy who has invented a whole genre of fiction, aren't you?" By this point, Bloomsbury had just released my anthology *Biographical Fiction: A Reader*, so I was able to say that people have been discussing biographical fiction for decades. I then named a few past and present authors who have been writing and thinking about the aesthetic form. Of course, it would be disingenuous and even hypocritical of me to fault or criticize the scholar who told me that I invented the genre,

because, like him, I totally failed to see what was right in front of me for nearly twenty years.

This blindness in relation to biofiction has been a problem since the 1930s. The first person to exhibit a significant failure in seeing was Georg Lukács. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), Lukács clarifies when and why the historical novel came into being. While Lukács concedes that there were some historical novels in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he claims that the aesthetic form came to fruition in the early nineteenth century. This certainly makes sense. After the French Revolution, there was concern that such a catastrophe could happen again. Therefore, to understand what led to 1789, there arose in Europe history programs, in which professors used rigorous and scientific methods of analysis to identify and define what caused major historical events. This attempt to systematize history and to establish more reliable methods for doing history explains the rise of the historical novel, an aesthetic form that visualizes the laws and causes of major historical collisions.

To his credit, Lukács was able to see that biographical novels were coming into being in the early part of the twentieth century. He notes the popularity of the biographical novel during the 1930s, and he names some of the most prominent practitioners of the literary form. But Lukács fails to see two separate things. One of the many strengths of *The Historical Novel* is Lukács's ability to identify and define the social, political, and intellectual forces that gave birth to the historical novel. But what he does not see is that different forces gave birth to the biographical novel. This is in part the case because he does not see the literary form as separate and distinct from the historical novel, which is the second failure in vision. For Lukács, the biographical novel is a subgenre or a version of the historical novel, and consequently, he uses historical-novel criteria to analyze and assess it. Within this framework, the biographical novel is an irredeemable aesthetic form, one doomed to literary failure.

Ironically, the biographical novel came into being to counter and correct the limitations and even dangers of the historical novel. The post-Enlightenment rise of positivisms (historical, philosophical, and psychological) and the desire to predict historical collisions made the historical novel appealing and even a seeming necessity for political progress. But there were those who considered the philosophy underwriting the historical novel to be deterministic at best and fatalistic at worst. Henry James captures the essence of this critique in a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett. Jewett sent James a copy of her historical novel *The Tory Lover*. In 1901, James responded, but instead of using the occasion to discuss the quality of *The Tory Lover*, he uses it to reflect on the irredeemable vices of the historical novel. For James, this is

an aesthetic form that is characterized by "a fatal cheapness." The historical novelist gives readers a multitude of "little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints," but what it lacks is "the real thing," which consists of "the invention, the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world." All of these are "non-existent" in the historical novel, an aesthetic form that James calls "humbug." Of crucial importance for James is the mysterious, indefinable, semi-autonomous dimension of human consciousness, which is not just different from but diametrically opposed to the "conditioned"[1] consciousness represented in the historical novel.

In *The Master*, a biographical novel about James, Colm Tóibín strategically references the Jewett letter in order to voice some of the problems with the historical novel. Late in the novel, Henry's brother William expresses concern about Henry's work. He encourages Henry to abandon the novel of manners about the superficial and materialistic English and to turn his attention to a "novel which would deal with our American history," specifically "about the Puritan Fathers." Henry not only rejects William's proposal, but also uses this occasion to express his contempt for the historical novel: "'May I put an end to this conversation,' Henry said, 'by stating clearly to you that I view the historical novel as tainted by a fatal cheapness.'" To punctuate his point, Henry ends the discussion by dismissing William's proposal with a single word, "humbug."[2] The significance of these remarks is staggering. In one of the most celebrated biographical novels, the protagonist denounces the historical novel, which clearly suggests that *The Master* should not be considered a historical novel.

In fact, Tóibín makes this point directly in his interview with Bethany Layne, which is included in this volume. When asked if there is a difference between the historical novel and the biographical novel, Tóibín says that there is. He then provides an example. Tóibín notes that James's apartment in Kensington was wired for electricity in 1896. A historical novelist, Tóibín claims, would incorporate such a detail in his or her work: "If you're writing a historical novel this is a marvelous scene for you where you're actually getting a key moment in history and you're integrating it into lives and you're seeing what the next day will be like." Tóibín does not write such novels, because "it would ruin my novel. It would be the end of the novel." By stark contrast, he writes biographical novels, which means that he "must be in James's mind all the time." This interview with Tóibín explains why he incorporated James's claim to Jewett about the historical novel being "tainted by a fatal cheapness" into *The Master*. For both James and Tóibín, there is a fatalistic dimension to the historical novel, because it underscores how humans are at

the mercy of ("conditioned" by) external forces—the wiring of the house will have necessary and discernible consequences on the inner life of characters. James considers the historical novel a cheap literary form because it lacks the richness of creativity—the historical "novel" merely copies what is.

Tóibín is not alone in his critique of and objections to the historical novel. Here are some of the claims of biographical novelists in this volume. The award-winning Spanish writer Javier Cercas told Virginia Rademacher: "Sometimes they [critics] say I write historical novels. I don't really like that label. I write novels in which history has a role, but they are not historical novels." Critically acclaimed Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk says something similar in an interview about her biographical novel on Jacob Frank: "I'm not really a fan of historical novels." She objects to them because they prioritize "historic events," and the popular ones reinforce "conservative schemata." Colum McCann is more forceful and direct. As he says in an interview with Robert Birnbaum, which is not included in this volume: "I hate the term 'historical novel.'"[3] He provides more insight into his reasons why in an interview with Synne Rifbjerg, which is also not included in this collection: "I hate the idea of the term 'the historical novel,' not that I hate history and not that I hate the novel, but I hate the way those two words match each other and plunge themselves down into an aspic, a softness; it almost wears a bodice of sorts."[4] McCann's metaphors (aspic and bodice) suggest that the historical novel contains and straitjackets the human, thus inhibiting expansion, development, and growth.

That such prominent biographical novelists object to and/or distance themselves from the historical novel is not as important as why, and it is through the blindness of a prominent American scholar that we might find some answers. Since the publication of *The Political Unconscious* in 1981, Frederic Jameson has been engaging, challenging, nuancing, and correcting Lukács's work. In his most recent book (*The Antinomies of Realism*), Jameson concludes with a forceful and direct confrontation with the Hungarian Marxist. The historical novel was Lukács's favored literary form, and in his 1937 book, he ends by offering suggestions for renewing and reinvigorating it for his present. Given this fact, Jameson's chapter title seems to implicitly throw down the gauntlet at Lukács's feet: "The Historical Novel Today, or, Is It Still Possible?" While Jameson questions some of Lukács's assertions and conclusions, his chapter ultimately does not mark a break with *The Historical Novel*, because Jameson ends by carrying on Lukács's project through his attempt to clarify how the historical novel must be updated in order to represent what he refers to as "historical futures."[5]

There are many strengths in Jameson's book and chapter, but I want to focus on just a couple of his moments of blindness, because they help

identify some of the entrenched scholarly prejudices against the biographical novel. Jameson starts by raising some formal problems about defining the historical novel. After indicating that there are so many varying, divergent, and contradictory forms of the contemporary historical novel, Jameson entertains the possibilities that the genre is impossible or perhaps "not the historical novel at all but rather realism as such."[6] What Jameson does so well in this chapter is to chart transformations in the aesthetic form from Walter Scott through Balzac to Tolstoy and beyond. If Scott gave us an aesthetic form predicated on "the distinction between the world-historical individual and the average hero,"[7] what Tolstoy did was to abolish the agency and power of the world-historical individual and to elevate the general will of the masses. Behind this aesthetic shift is Tolstoy's conviction that freedom is an illusion and therefore history rather than people dictates what happens. So Tolstoy "leaves history intact, with all its cataclysmic events," but he does so by "stripping it of its actors and decision-makers."[8]

After *War and Peace* emerges a new form of the historical novel. Here is how Jameson describes this new iteration: "The next logical and formal possibility will then be that of names without events, and indeed I believe this reduction of the world-historical individuals to little more than their names is what characterizes one of the two distinctive forms of the historical novel today."[9] In a move certainly in the tradition of Lukács, who condemned the "biographical form in the present-day historical novel,"[10] Jameson clearly opposes the biographical turn. Says Jameson about the new form of the biography-focused historical novel: "As we shall see, such historical names, bloated with biography, tend towards an autonomy of their own as the history of which they were once a part becomes spongy."[11] Fascinating here is not so much what Jameson says but what he fails to consider. Is it possible that *War and Peace* symbolized not so much the death of one form of the historical novel and the birth of another but the emergence of a new and different aesthetic form? It is worth noting that Jameson does not even mention the term biographical novel in this chapter, even though he discusses a few as if they were historical novels.

At this point, I will use Jameson's evidence and argument to limn an alternative literary history, one that better articulates the conditions under which the biographical novel came into being. In his chapter, Jameson reads developments in the historical novel in relation to the Annales school, which does "away with narrative actors altogether."[12] Jameson does not specifically engage the work of anyone belonging to the Annales school, but one such scholar wrote about the rise of the biographical novel. In his 1938 essay "History and Psychology," Lucien Febvre discusses "novelistic biographies," of which there has been "such profusion in recent years." Febvre is not approving.

He lists a number of vices, including "repeated blunders, mix-ups and gaffes"; "the systematic plundering and cynical plagiarizing of historians by the busy hacks of historiography"; and the tendency of authors to "project themselves as they are back into the past with their own feelings, their own ideas and their own intellectual and moral prejudices."[13] Novelistic biographies, what we now refer to as biographical novels, are irredeemable aesthetic forms, because the authors misrepresent biography and therewith history.

What Febvre, Lukács, and Jameson fail to see is that biographical novelists do something radically different from historical novelists. Oscar Wilde authored what is perhaps the first theoretical reflection about biofiction. Here is what Wilde's Vivian from "The Decay of Lying" says in the year 1889: "If a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is."[14] For the author of biofiction, of utmost importance is the artist and his or her creative vision, and not the historical past or the biographical subject, because, as Wilde says: "Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose."[15] According to this logic, those who write history or biography are not and cannot be artists, because they merely represent (copy) what is or was.

This stance against representational aesthetics does not mean that authors should not write biofiction. Wilde acknowledges that novelists can base a work on a person from the past, but he qualifies this claim by saying that the author, to actually be an artist, should appropriate rather than represent the biographical subject's life, and the author should do this in the service of his or her own creative vision. This is exactly what Wilde did. In the play *Salomé*, Wilde uses the biblical figure to create a more sexually aware and liberated female. This work clarifies Wilde's view of art, which is best expressed in "The Decay of Lying": "A great artist invents a type, and life tries to copy it."[16] The gifted writer does not merely picture the past through a representative protagonist. He or she strategically creates a character, even if it is based on a real person, in advance of the age in order to bring into existence a new reality in the present and for the future, thus making this person a creative artist rather than a mere copyist.

Understanding that the biographical novel does something radically different from the historical novel poses a substantive challenge to the work of Febvre and Jameson. History becomes spongy for those who focus on bloated biography, as Jameson says, and authors of biofiction make repeated blunders, as Febvre claims, but this is not because biographical novelists are ignorant of history, as Jameson and Febvre imply. It is because they are using rather than representing history and biography, which is one of the distinctive

features of the biographical novel. Take, for instance, George Moore's *The Brook Kerith*, published in 1916. In this novel about Christ, Jesus does not die on the Cross. Rather, Joseph of Arimathea takes Christ down from the Cross right before he dies and nurses him back to health. Moore's Jesus then renounces some of his former teachings as fanatical. Did Moore just happen to get the details about Christ wrong? Did he fail to read the last chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Or, did he consciously and strategically alter the historical record? And if so, for what purpose?

David Ebershoff's 2000 novel *The Danish Girl* will help clarify one of the standard practices of the biographical novelist. Based on the life of Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe, the first person to undergo sex confirmation surgery, Ebershoff states explicitly that the "reader should not look to this novel for very many biographical details of Einar Wegener's life." Ebershoff found "some important facts about Einar's actual transformation,"[17] and he then used those details in order to craft a narrative that would underscore the degree to which "there is universality to Einar's question of identity."[18] In short, Ebershoff converted Einar/Lili into a symbol. Thus, Ebershoff used Einar/Lili, not to picture the actual life of a real historical figure, but to express his own views about the link between a constructed identity and human agency. Given the emphasis on fiction, authors of biofiction do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth. To illustrate, here are the reflections of three prominent biographical novelists from three different periods. A friend of Moore's noted that the Christ in one of the early drafts of *The Brook Kerith* was not identical to the one found in the Gospels. Here is Moore's reply: "You must look upon my Jesus as an independent creation, and not as an attempt to discover what the real man was from the Gospels."[19] Gore Vidal has written some outstanding biographical novels, and in a 1974 interview with Gerald Clarke, he said the following about the subject of his biographical novel *Burr*: "My Burr is not the real Burr."[20] Joanna Scott has written two brilliant biographical novels, and in a 2016 essay about biofiction, she says the following about Egon Schiele, who is the protagonist of her biographical novel *Arrogance*: "I was not trying to pretend that my Schiele was the real Schiele. I just wanted him to be real."[21]

To bring into sharper focus one of the key distinctions between the two forms, let me briefly discuss two borderline cases. There are some historical figures about whom so little is known that one must raise the question whether a biographical novel is even possible. For instance, Hannah Kent has published *Burial Rites*, a novel about an Icelandic woman who was executed for murder, and *The Good People*, a novel about an Irish woman who killed a four-year-old boy because she thought he was a changeling. For *The Good People*, Kent acknowledges in her interview for this volume that she only

"had two newspaper articles" and "no biographical information." Given the dearth of biographical material, Kent turned to history in order to construct her protagonist, so her main character, named after the actual person, is a logical product and representation of her environment:

> With *The Good People* I again did a lot of research into the outside world or environment. I looked at the lives led by people who resembled these characters or who could be said to. So that, while everything was imagined with *The Good People*, it was nonetheless likely, as likely as possible.

This characterization reveals much about the nature of Kent's aesthetic approach, which sounds more like the method of the historical novelist than a biographical novelist. Instead of referring to her novels as primarily fiction, she calls them "speculative biographies," and as such, they "borrow from or lean on history in that they are research-led and a great amount of research is required." Thus, she concludes that her novels "reinstall historical context as significant and determining."

The Nigerian-Belgian author Chika Unigwe has a much different approach. Unigwe has published a biographical novel about Olaudah Equiano, and she is currently writing one about Equiano's daughter, Joanna, about whom almost nothing is known. In my interview with her, I asked if it is possible to do a biographical novel about someone when there is almost no information. Her response is illuminating.

> In a historical novel, the author is invested in being true to the realities of that time, so there is little space to create characters that transcend their time in a very radical way, which you can do with biofiction. So in that way I think that Joanna is certainly more biofiction than historical fiction. There are things that Joanna does that I doubt that she would have been able to do if I were writing historical fiction. So I think in biofiction you are able to dream a lot more, a lot wider. Your dreams are more expansive, as a writer, than in historical fiction.

Given the differences between the historical and biographical novel, readers come to the works for very different things. As Unigwe concludes: "Readers don't come to biographical fiction for truth. They come to biographical fiction for possibilities." What readers want from the historical novel is an accurate representation of "the realities of that time," but what they want from the biographical novel is a model of a figure that transcends the deterministic forces of history and the environment, and this is something that places

the protagonist of the biographical novel in irreconcilable conflict with the protagonist of the historical novel.

In her interview for this volume, Rosa Montero best clarifies what readers get from biographical novels. For Montero, the goal of the biographical novel should not so much be to depict a real life as to use the life "to try to better understand the world in its greater complexity." To illustrate, she asks what Robert Graves achieves in his novel *I, Claudius*. Her answer: "He wasn't telling us the story of Emperor Claudius, but rather making an impressive fresco of the human condition." Montero makes a similar claim about Camilo Sánchez's *The Widow of the Van Goghs* (*La viuda de los Van Gogh*). Montero considers this novel exemplary "in the way that the author uses the life of Van Gogh, the character, to tell a greater story about the nature of existence." She specifies exactly what fiction writers give readers in a discussion about the human "capacity for symbolic understanding." Biography is of crucial importance, because it provides humans with an "existential map," which is a framework about "how to live." In Montero's case, she has authored a biographical novel about Marie Curie. But it would be incorrect to say that her goal with this work was simply to give readers a picture of the famous Polish scientist. Rather, Montero unapologetically says that she "used Marie Curie as an enormous screen on which to project . . . possibilities." Like Unigwe, the biographical subject is a figure that the author uses in order to imagine into existence possible ways of thinking and being for readers in the present and the future. As Ebershoff says in his interview: "Artists are visionaries; they see something that does not yet exist. They can bring into creation something that is not yet there." Here is how Kevin Barry, who has authored a biographical novel about John Lennon, puts the matter in his interview: "There are figures [like Lennon] who introduce something new in terms of their persona and in terms of how they carry themselves." Thus, what we get in Barry's novel is not so much the life story of Lennon but the author's reflections about creating meaning and life through art: "It was a book about how to try and make a piece of art: whether it's a novel, or an album, or a painting, or film. It's about going to the dark place—we don't write, or draw, or make music because we are fine, we do it because we're messed up, because life is meaningless, cruel, often disastrous and ridiculous and there is no fucking shape to it. That's why we make art, as an attempt to put meaning and shape onto our lives." For Sabina Murray, who has authored a biographical novel about Roger Casement, the biographical novelist uses the life of someone to illustrate what it means "to be a person" in the midst of overpowering forces that dehumanize us.

What biographical novelists primarily reject is the governing idea animating the historical novel, which is Karl Marx's claim that it "is not

the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."[22] By stark contrast, biographical novelists spotlight the power (albeit limited) of human consciousness to evade determinism and thereby to shape an alternative reality into being. This is a central idea in the biofiction of Emma Donoghue (*Life Mask* and *The Sealed Letter*). In my interview with Donoghue, she notes that she has authored a historical novel, and it functions exactly as Lukács says it should: "My very first historical novel, *Slammerkin*, is probably a bit deterministic in that while I show this girl enjoying certain limited freedoms, by the time she's sixteen, she's executed. So she's been slapped down." Instead of foregrounding the protagonist's ability to counter or transcend the deterministic forces of her culture, she invented a character "mostly to show those social forces at work." But her biographical novels are much different. For instance, Donoghue has recently published *Frog Music* (2014), a wonderful biographical novel about Jenny Bonnet, a cross-dressing, nineteenth-century woman from San Francisco who flagrantly defied unjust laws and paid for her defiance with her life. For Lukács, the best historical novelists never create "eccentric figures" like Bonnet, "figures who fall psychologically outside the atmosphere of" their "age."[23] This only stands to reason, because the ideal character of a historical novel is supposed to symbolically represent the whole place and age. But when I asked Donoghue about her objectives as a biographical novelist, she said that she chooses "characters who don't seem to fit the historical narrative." Thus, her character Bonnet is not "an illustration of nineteenth century social forces crushing somebody." To the contrary, she is a character who "has an almost trans-historical memorability to me," says Donoghue.

This objective of using a biographical subject to provide an "existential map" for semi-autonomous and quasi-meaningful living explains the kind of characters to which biographical novelists are drawn. For example, Rudi Nureyev is the protagonist of McCann's *Dancer*, and he functions as the quintessential biographical subject, which is to say that he is the living refutation of the historical novel. A loyal Soviet, Nureyev's father has adopted Marx's political philosophy, and he tries to indoctrinate his son with that ideology. As the elder Nureyev says to the young Rudi: "Your social existence determines consciousness, son."[24] But this is precisely the philosophy that Rudi and McCann ultimately reject as flawed, limited, debilitating, and unacceptable. McCann brilliantly articulates his view of art's uncanny power to assist readers and viewers in the process of evading determinism and of constructing self through his description of the genesis of *Dancer*. At first blush, it might seem that what motivated McCann to write *Dancer* was his passionate interest in Rudi's life. But actually, it was Nureyev's

impact on McCann's friend Jimmy Smallhorne that inspired McCann. In my interview with him, McCann admits that he "wasn't really interested in Rudolf Nureyev." To the contrary, he "was much more interested in the story of Jimmy Smallhorne, a working-class friend of mine from Dublin who was mesmerized when he saw Rudolf Nureyev on television. It was a story like Jimmy's that mattered, and that was my beginning of stepping into the biographical novel." The goal of the biographical novelist is not to accurately represent the life of the biographical subject—McCann admits that his Nureyev is "probably 90 percent imagined." Rather, it is to use the life story of the historical figure to make the reader "come alive in a different body, in a different time." In short, the artist's goal is to "embody us in wakefulness," and this is what Rudi seeks to do through dance and McCann through fiction.

Let me briefly specify how this functions in *Dancer*. As an artist, Rudi does not simply project into being a moment of beauty. He sets into motion a process of endlessly discovering and creating a new reality. Here is how one character in the novel describes Rudi's impact on her: "Rudi had stood upon that stage like an exhausted explorer who had arrived in some unimagined country and, despite the joy of the discovery, was immediately looking for another unimagined place, and I felt perhaps that place was me."[25] Rudi's art mentally transports his viewers into the unimaginable, a psychic space that transcends imagined borders and limitations. In sum, Rudi does what Wilde and Tóibín's 1899 James do, which is to use art in order to set life into motion. As one character notes: "Rudi gathers a group around himself, launching into some diatribe about dance as an experiment, all its impulses going to the creation of an adventure and the end of each adventure being a new impulse towards further creation, *If a dancer, he is good*, says Rudi, *he has to straddle the time! He must drag the old forward into the new!*"[26] Rudi uses dance to introduce his audience to the dynamic power of creating life, and McCann, Ebershoff, Barry, Montero, Unigwe, Donoghue, and Tóibín do the same through their novels. Within this framework, it is McCann's usage of Rudi, Ebershoff's usage of Einar/Lili, Barry's usage of Lennon, Montero's usage of Curie, Unigwe's usage of Joanna, Donoghue's usage of Bonnet, and Tóibín's usage of James that enable them to achieve their aesthetic goals. Biographical and/or historical truth—these are subordinate to the more important goal of liberating the reader into the embodied wakefulness of a creating and creative consciousness, a consciousness that leads to new possibilities in seeing and being.

That biographical novelists do something very different from historical novelists should be clear. But what led them to adopt this approach to the novel? A quick look at a recent collection of essays in the volume *The Biographical Turn* will provide one possible answer. This volume focuses

on "the emergence of biographical research as an accepted critical scholarly method of investigation since 1980."[27] For the editors of the volume, of crucial importance for the biographical turn was an "agency perspective,"[28] one that emphasizes not the degree to which individuals fit within the causal network of historical systems from a given time, but one that underscores the role "individual agency"[29] plays in redirecting and reshaping established historical approaches to the past. This same intellectual energy led to the early twentieth-century shift from history to biography and the rise of the biographical novel.

The prominent Bloomsbury writer Lytton Strachey, who revolutionized the biography, provides some compelling insight. Like Jameson, Strachey was cognizant of the historical determinism that dominated the nineteenth century, which is found in the works of Tolstoy and the historical positivists. While Todd Avery does not discuss Lukács, his recent work about Strachey provides us with valuable ways of thinking about what led to the shift away from historical fiction and to the legitimization of biographical fiction. For Avery, one of the major developments of the early twentieth century is the concurrent rejection of history as a science and the rise of history as primarily an art. This would lead to the emergence of corresponding aesthetic forms, and for Avery, it was the Bloomsbury Group that would transmute this intellectual development into "a type of life writing that contains biofiction's DNA."[30] The key figure for Avery is Strachey.

In a 1903 essay, Strachey says that history as a scientific method is extremely limited. While it can provide some insight into the mechanical operations of cultures and societies of the past, "the method by which true conclusions are reached with regard to individual minds of the past cannot be termed a scientific method: it is a totally different method." Therefore, Strachey concludes that "the only possible way of narrating the characteristics of human minds is by the aid of—not the scientific—but the artistic method."[31] Thinking of history more in terms of art than science set Strachey on an aesthetic journey that would move increasingly more toward biofiction, a point that Avery intelligently makes by quoting from the preface of *Eminent Victorians*: "Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past."[32] Strachey would develop this idea further over the course of his career, culminating in the book *Elizabeth and Essex*, which, Avery claims, "Strachey deliberately approached . . . in a biofictional spirit" by "intentionally" manipulating and inventing "historical facts in the service of an intensely personal vision."[33] To support this claim and approach, Avery quotes a 1927 Strachey letter that could be read as one of the key ideas in a biofiction manifesto: "I wish I could write Elizabeth as well. If only she could be reduced to nonsense—that would be perfect. The whole of Art lies there. To pulverize the material and remould it in the shape of one's own particular absurdity."[34]

Lukács, who condemns the biographical novel in a whole section of *The Historical Novel*, and Febvre see the biographical novel, but because they consider it a version of the historical novel, they fail to see that it is its own thing, that it consciously and strategically does something different from and even in conflict with the historical novel. Jameson does not even see the biographical novel, but this is because he is so fixated on how intellectual shifts gave birth to different iterations of the historical novel that he could not see that a countervailing aesthetic form like the biographical novel was coming into being.

This blindness in relation to the biographical novel has staggering consequences, because scholars frequently use unsuitable and inappropriate criteria to analyze and assess the literary form. The scandal surrounding the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) will prove useful at this point. While it is true that much of the controversy revolves around Styron's representation of blacks, a close look at the work of prominent writers suggests that the primary objections were aesthetic in nature. More specifically, scholars believe that Styron failed as a historical novelist. For instance, one year after the novel was published, ten black writers wrote vicious attacks of Styron and *The Confessions*. According to Lerone Bennett, "Instead of following the traditional technique of the historical novelist, who works within the tension of accepted facts, Styron forces history to move within the narrow grooves of his preconceived ideas."[35] Within this framework, novelists are free to fill in the gaps of history by inventing characters or scenes that could logically supplement or illuminate the established facts, but they do not have the freedom to alter the historical record. Based on this approach, John A. Williams says that a writer who focuses on a historical figure "is required to be *both* a novelist and a historian."[36] These criticisms explain why the editor of the volume, John Henrik Clarke, raised the following question in his introduction: "Why did William Styron create *his* Nat Turner and ignore the most important historical facts relating to the real Nat Turner?"[37] Had Bennett, Williams, and Clarke understood some of the conventions of the biographical novel, they would have realized that these critiques are misguided and inapplicable. This is not to say that there can be no critique of Styron and his novel. Rather, it is to say that one should not criticize a biographical novel for failing to be a historical novel, for failing to do what a historical novel does.

We get additional insight into the issues at stake in a famous clash about aesthetics. In 1968, the historian C. Vann Woodward moderated a forum titled "The Uses of History in Fiction" with Robert Penn Warren, Ralph

Ellison, and Styron. What made this event so momentous was a tacit conflict regarding the differences between the historical and the biographical novel and the legitimacy of the biographical novel. By this time, Warren had published *All the King's Men* (1946), a historical novel about 1930s populism in the South. While most readers know that the protagonist is loosely based on the life of the politician Huey Long, Warren changed his name to Willie Stark. This enabled Warren to take many liberties with his character. Styron made a different choice by naming his protagonist after the actual historical figure. This caused considerable outrage. Ellison confronted and criticized Styron, saying that "the moment you put any known figures into the book, then somebody is going to say, 'But he didn't have that mole on that side of his face; it was on *that* side. You said that he had a wife; he didn't have a wife.'" Naming the protagonist after an actual historical figure makes a person vulnerable to criticism, so Ellison advises authors to "lie and disguise a historical figure"[38] by changing the name. Ellison was not the only person at this forum to fault Styron for authoring a biographical novel. During the question and answer session, one audience member, someone clearly critical of Styron, made the following remark: "I want to ask Mr. Warren this: since we all felt that *All the King's Men* had to do with Huey Long, why didn't *he* say Huey Long, or King Fish, or something like that? I wonder what would have happened to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had it just been called the *Confessions of a Revolt Leader*, or something like that."[39] The implication is that, had Styron authored a historical novel rather than a biographical novel, he would not have found himself under attack in the late 60s.

These criticisms of Styron make sense, but only if one uses historical-novel criteria to assess *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The exchange between Ellison and Styron brings into sharp focus what distinguishes the two aesthetic forms. For Ellison, naming the protagonist after an actual historical figure binds the author to a specific truth contract, one in which authors are obliged to represent the biographical subject with as much precision and accuracy as possible. With the historical novel, the protagonist is an invented figure, even if it is based on an actual person, so the author can do with the character what he or she wants. But the biographical novel is different, which is why Ellison says: "You don't have the freedom to snatch any and everybody, and completely recreate them."[40] By naming the protagonist after the original, the author has severely restricted him or herself as an artist. Thus, if authors take liberties with the actual historical figure, they do so at their own aesthetic peril, which, Ellison implies, explains the critical response to Styron's novel.

But as a biographical novelist in the tradition of Wilde, Styron has a much different view than Ellison. Specifically, Ellison and Styron differ with regard to the kind of "truths" biographical novelists are obligated to give readers.

Styron, like Wilde, holds that the creative writer's obligation is first and foremost to his or her own creative vision rather than the biographical subject or the historical past. So the "truth" that readers get in a biographical novel is of the author's vision of life rather than the life of the biographical subject. Put more specifically, what readers get in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is not an accurate picture of the nineteenth-century slave rebel. They get a figure that Styron converted into a metaphor in order to represent his own vision of life. Styron is absolutely clear about this. In response to the critiques of his book, he says that a novel has "its own metaphysics, its own reason for being as an aesthetic object." With regard to *The Confessions*, he claims that, while loosely based on history, it "can at the same time be a metaphorical plan, a metaphorical diagram for a writer's attitude toward human existence." This is the case because, as "a work of literature," the biographical novel has "its own reality, its own power, its own appeal, which derive from factors that don't really relate to history."[41] Styron is not really that interested in history, which is why *The Confessions of Nat Turner* cannot be considered a historical novel. The biographical novelist appropriates the life story of a person from history and then converts that story into a metaphor. As such, Styron does not give readers history or even biography. What he does is to appropriate the biographical figure in order to create a "metaphorical diagram" that readers could then use to illuminate something from both the past and the present. The accent here is on the metaphorical diagram, not the historical past or the biographical subject.

Margaret Atwood has authored a spectacular biographical novel, and she offers us an excellent way to think about the non-historical dimension of biofictional aesthetics. *Alias Grace* (1996) is about the Irish servant Grace Marks, who was convicted in Canada of murdering her employer. In a lecture about the novel, Atwood told her audience that "such stories are not about this or that slice of the past." To the contrary, "they are about human nature," they are "about truth and lies, and disguises and revelations."[42] Imagine for a moment a historian saying that his or her book about a specific historical event or figure was not really about a particular slice of the past. This would most certainly disqualify the work from being considered a historical text. And yet, scholars follow Lukács by treating biofiction as a form of the historical novel, despite the novelists' insistence to the contrary.

For Lukács, Febvre, and Jameson, historical novelists do history, and since they think that biographical novelists are historical novelists, they hold that biographical novelists must be doing a biographical form of history. But as I have been arguing throughout this introduction, it would be more accurate to say that biographical novelists use rather than do history. In an interview with Robert J. Harris and Jane Yolen, who have coauthored

two important biographical novels for children, I asked them to explain why they made some egregious changes to the historical and biographical record. Here is Yolen's response: "Never forget that this is fiction. It is not biography or history. It is using biography and history to tell a story."[43] Nuala O'Connor, who has authored biographical novels about Emily Dickinson and Belle Bilton, amplifies on this idea in her interview for this volume: "This is a novel. And I think when it says 'a novel,' that should be enough for the reader to realize this is invention. . . What's true and what's not is not what's important to you as a novelist—story is what's important, narrative pay-off." Biographical novelists identify something of major significance in the life of a person from the past and then they appropriate that life in order to express their own artistic vision.

But there is a rich irony in the biographical novelist's reconfiguration of historical and biographical truth. Many of the biographical novelists in both *Truthful Fictions* and this book acknowledge that postmodernism has played a crucial role in the rise and legitimization of biofiction. To quote Susan Sellers, who has authored a biographical novel about Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf: the "proliferation of biographical fiction has its roots in postmodernism, with its twin suspicions of truth and fiction." And yet, many contemporary biographical novelists are critical of postmodernism. Author of biographical novels about Roland Barthes and Reinhard Heydrich, Laurent Binet says: "I think that contending that 'truth does not exist, everything is fiction' is literary dandyism. I do understand that this constitutes a critical trend in literature, but I believe that postmodernism is deeper and more thought provoking than this."

If we understand postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives,"[44] to use Jean-Francois Lyotard's formulation, then the authors in this volume can both explain why literary postmodernism came to be, but also why biographical novelists have some serious reservations about undisciplined versions of postmodernism. The primary reason why contemporary novelists cast a skeptical eye on metanarratives is because they realize that authors can create literary symbols, which function and signify like metanarratives, to do whatever they need or want. As Binet says: "It is too easy to demonstrate something by resorting to fiction. If we can invent any situation, any event, and place any character in any fictitious situation, then we can demonstrate anything we want about this character." Since the protagonist of a biographical novel is based on an actual historical figure, this grounds the narrative more firmly in the concrete and puts some limits on the authors' freedom to construct whatever they want. As David Lodge, author of biographical novels about Henry James and H. G. Wells, says: "If you say at the beginning that all the letters are real letters, then there is a documentary element in the

novel, which persuades the reader to trust the story. If your priority was not to create this illusion of fact, of factually reporting this life, then you wouldn't do it and you would be free to use your imagination and make your characters do whatever you feel you want them to do." Anchoring the imagination in the concrete, to use Tóibín's terminology from his interview in this volume, limits the author, but it does so in order to ground the imagination and to produce a more plausible and less ideological narrative, which explains in part why the biographical novel has flourished in our postmodern age.

This shift to the concrete does not mean that contemporary biographical novelists reject postmodernism. It just means that these writers have a nuanced approach to and inject more gravitas into postmodernism. The traditional postmodernist approach, endlessly deconstructing arbitrary borders of meaning, frivolously engaging in a semantic game of perpetual play, must give way to a more serious intellectual enterprise, which is the knowing construction of a cultural framework in the name of political advancement and social justice. In his interview with Willemien Froneman, Stephanus Muller, who has authored a biographical novel about the composer Arnold van Wyk, explains how postcolonial theory altered his relationship to postmodernism: "I *am transformed* by the postcolonial condition into this existential form of self-reflection. And literature and the sensibility of postmodern fiction responds to this transformation, which, as you say, pushes beyond mere play, mere intellectualism, mere narcissism. Ever since my 'discovery' of various strands of postcolonial discourse in the nineties, I was struck by the political direction it added to the postmodern sensibility." This has led Muller to think about the need for literature that "takes seriously the act of writing as a political act." Cercas, who simultaneously embraces and rejects postmodernism, puts the matter clearly in his interview when he discusses the limitations of David Foster Wallace's fiction: Wallace "realized postmodernism saw literature as just a game. And for me, post-postmodernism would be literature as a game, but as an absolutely serious game, a game where everything is at stake."

As a scholar of biofiction, postmodernism has been for me a source of much frustration, even though I consider myself a postmodernist and have argued that postmodernism in part has made biofiction possible. I have now edited four special journal issues about biofiction, and one of the most irritating types of submission I receive follows a consistent pattern: the scholar submits an essay that does not discuss a single work of biofiction scholarship but uses postmodern theory to make the obvious claim that there is much overlap between genres. Based on this overlap, the scholar concludes that the historical novel is like a biographical novel, the biographical novel like a roman-a-clef, the roman-a-clef like biography, biography like

autobiography, and autobiography like fiction. Therefore, the historical novel is a biographical novel, the biographical novel is a roman-a-clef, the roman-a-clef is a biography, a biography is an autobiography, and autobiography is fiction. What differentiates many contemporary biographical novelists is their yearning for clarity and precision and their insistence that what they are doing is distinct. Tóibín, McCann, Donoghue, and Unigwe distinguish the biographical novel from the historical novel, and Tóibín goes so far as to say that were he to do a historical novel, this would be the end of his work. Many contemporary biographical novelists are different from the many undisciplined postmodern scholars because they make careful distinctions, but they are still postmodernists because they realize that these distinctions are sociocultural constructions rather than ontological realities.

For many biographical novelists, what is behind their frustration with non-rigorous forms of postmodernism is their belief in the power of literature to expose political, cultural, and intellectual ailments and to offer healthier and more life-promoting ways of seeing and being. Since many postmodernists spend their time blending and blurring distinctions, they overlook the precise kinds of critiques and possibilities contained in many first-rate works of literature. Anchee Min is one of those biographical novelists who offers an incisive critique of a specific cultural, intellectual, and political way of thinking and being. When discussing *Becoming Madame Mao*, a biographical novel about Jiang Ching, Min claims that "biofiction can contribute to diagnosing cultural ailments," and she specifically examines in her novel how Ching contributed significantly to China's Cultural Revolution, which led to the oppression and death of millions. For Min, the virtue of biofiction is that readers can see through the "existential map" of Ching's life how contemporary political leaders and media outlets in the United States use similar structures and systems to institute "its own Cultural Revolution."

But merely exposing a cultural sickness is not enough. Many of the best biographical novelists offer an alternative way of seeing and being that promotes a healthier and more socially just polity. For instance, Barbara Chase-Riboud published *Sally Hemings* in 1979, and this work has contributed to new ways of thinking and experiencing Thomas Jefferson, American race relations in the past and the present, and America's founding stories and documents. When it was first released, Jefferson scholars dismissed *Sally Hemings* as a naïve romantic fantasy. Surely, no white man of Jefferson's stature would have had a long-term intimate relationship with a black slave like Hemings, as is depicted in *Sally Hemings*. But Chase-Riboud's novel had such an enormous impact that it in part led to Eugene A. Foster's DNA testing, which confirmed that Hemings's descendants are related to Jefferson, made plausible the idea that Jefferson did have an extended relationship with Hemings, and has since

forced Monticello to include Hemings as an important part of the story of Jefferson's estate. In a very literal and material sense, Chase-Riboud has brought into existence a new conceptual and physical reality through her biographical novel, as should be clear from her interview in this volume.[45]

Conversations with Biographical Novelists differs significantly from *Truthful Fictions*. In the 2014 book, I conducted all the interviews, and this had some unfortunate consequences: there is some redundancy in the interviews, my blind spots inevitably appear, and there is a singular perspective in the way the material is framed. To avoid and counter some of those limitations with this volume, I issued a Call For Interviews (CFI), and the response was overwhelming. Unfortunately, there were many fine interviews that I could not include. But the ones in this volume have the virtue of broadening our understanding of biofiction and exposing some differences in approaches to the literary form. In short, not all the interviewers or novelists in this volume agree with each other about the definitions of biofiction. But this lack of consensus is one of the strengths of this book. Some of the interviewers asked questions that would never have occurred to other interviewers, and in the process, these interviews open new pathways for thinking about the aesthetic form.

And evidence suggests there is a hunger for more studies about biofiction. Before 2016, there was no special journal issue devoted to the study of biofiction, but over the last three years, academic publications such as *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (2016), *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* (2018), the *American Book Review* (2018), and the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* (2018) have published special issues devoted to the aesthetic form. Before 2015, there had been no major academic events about biofiction, but in the 2016–17 academic year, there were four: Julia Novak hosted a public roundtable forum titled "The Ethics of Biofiction" at King's College London, England; Bethany Layne hosted a one-day conference titled "Postmodernist Biofiction" at the University of Reading in England; Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner hosted a symposium on "Reading and Writing Australasian Historical Biofictions" at La Trobe University in Australia; and Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca hosted a symposium titled "Illuminating Lives: The Biographical Impulse in Postcolonial Literatures" at the Centre for Teaching and Research in Postcolonial Studies at the Université de Liège in Belgium. Before 2015, there had never been an MLA panel about biofiction, but in 2018, there were three: Hispanic Biofiction, Biofiction and the Antipodes, and Postcolonial Biofiction. In other words, the study of biofiction has not just become a legitimate area of scholarly inquiry, but it has also become a major field of study throughout the world. This current collection thus responds to a burgeoning scholarly interest and need within the academic

and intellectual community, while it contributes significantly to the direction that the study of the field will take.

Notes

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